Chesapeake Bay Field Office

Poplar Island Exploding with Wildlife!

Records from the 1600's described Poplar Island as being over 2,000 acres. By 1990, erosion reduced the island to remnants totaling less than 10 acres. The Poplar Island Restoration Project, started in 1998, is restoring the island and 1,100 acres of wetland and upland habitat using dredged material from Baltimore's shipping-channel. Currently, the island is quite flat with marshes but few shrubs or trees.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Chesapeake Bay Field Office is leading wildlife management for the Poplar Island project. Biologists are finding innovative ways to use Christmas trees to provide shelter and nesting areas for much of the Chesapeake wildlife. After last year's holiday season, roughly 250 trees were hauled on boats to Poplar Island.

The Christmas trees were strategically placed on habitat islands that are located in created wetlands, and are meant to provide both cover and nesting sites for colonial waterbirds such as snowy and cattle egrets. Christmas tree debris piles were also placed in the newly created wetlands in an effort to attract other bird, mammal and amphibian species. During this past breeding season, waterfowl species such as mallards and black ducks nested in most wetland debris piles. Small rodents such as meadow voles and white footed mice were also observed within the debris piles during monitoring visits.

More than 130 bird species have recorded over at the site, 19 of which have been documented as nesting. Commonly observed birds include: osprey, bald eagles, egrets, herons, cormorants, terns, and several waterfowl species. All of these species utilize the wetlands and adjacent waters for foraging, resting, and/or nesting.

Biologists were also recently surprised while monitoring created wetlands on Poplar Island. They discovered saltmarsh periwinkles. What's so exciting about this find is that previous monitoring at two created wetlands located on Poplar Island did not show much invertebrate activity as compared to mainland marshes. Until now, invertebrates such as periwinkles had not been documented in the created marshes.

Now that the wetland habitats are beginning to mature, they are beginning to attract typical saltmarsh invertebrate species such periwinkles. Periwinkles are snails commonly found in the intertidal zone of brackish and saltwater marshes. Because they are air breathers, they are often found during periods of high water above the waterline on stems of saltmarsh cordgrass. They are a crucial component of the ecosystem, feeding on detritus (decaying matter) and algae and are an important source of food for waterbirds, crabs, and fish.

In addition to monitoring plant growth and wildlife use in the wetlands and colonial waterbird nesting management, biologists are focusing efforts on wildlife disease response, nuisance wildlife management and habitat management/development. Submerged aquatic vegetation (SAV) beds in the shallow waters around the island are checked for growth and wildlife use.

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